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STATE FOR NEA/ARPI

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TAGS: PHUM PGOV KWMN EIND KU WOMEN POLITICAL RIGHTS

SUBJECT: JUNE 2 MUNICIPAL COUNCIL ELECTIONS TO MARK
REEMERGENCE OF INFLUENTIAL BODY; HIGHLIGHT PAST CORRUPTION

REF: A. KUWAIT 1836

B. KUWAIT 1808

C. KUWAIT 1633

D. KUWAIT 1401

E. 04 KUWAIT 4219

Classified By: Ambassador Richard LeBaron for reason 1.4 (d).

1. (SBU) Summary: The Kuwaiti Municipal Council (Al Majlis Al Baladi) is an influential governing body that retains great authority on important issues such as construction projects, economic development, and commercial planning. Despite its "municipal" name, the Council's jurisdiction is national. Elections for the 16-member Council are scheduled for June 2, during which an all-male electorate will select ten members for the first Council since 1999. The Council has been in a caretaker status since 2003 when the 1999 Council concluded its four year term of service. The Cabinet decided to delay elections, originally scheduled for 2003, because of its desire to first pass legislation on women's political rights and new laws restricting the authority of the Municipal Council. While the previous Council accomplished many objectives including approving the Boubyan Island and Failaka development projects and initiating the Shuwaikh Free-Trade Zone, there were frequent accusations of administrative corruption and inefficiency, including accusations by a former Council member. Municipal candidate campaign platforms are primarily focused on combating corruption, community beautification, reducing pollution, and solving traffic problems. Although Kuwaiti women recently gained their full political rights, they cannot participate in this election because the election date was set before the May 16 suffrage decision and there is no provision to register new voters; they will be able to participate in the 2009 municipal elections. The GOK appoints six Council members, some of whom are expected to be women. End Summary.

The June 2 Election and Candidate Campaigns

2. (U) There are 54 candidates running for ten open seats in the June 2 Municipal Council elections. The Council is composed of 16 members, ten of whom are elected, with the remaining six appointed by the GOK. Elections are held every four years and every seat is open at election time. Women are not permitted to participate in this election; however, it is possible that at least one -- some speculate as many as three -- will be appointed by the GOK. Because of the technical nature of much of the Council's work, past appointed members often had professional backgrounds in engineering or other mechanical fields. (Note: Women gained the right to vote and run for office in national-level political elections in May and will be eligible to participate in the 2009 Municipal Council elections. Women will not participate in this year's elections because the municipal election date was set before women gained their rights and there was no provision to register new voters before the June 2 balloting. End Note.)

3. (U) The Council members represent ten constituencies -- one candidate elected to the Council from each -- and all Kuwaitis registered to vote for members of the National Assembly (approximately 137,000 men) are automatically eligible to vote in Municipal Council elections. The ten municipal constituencies comprise much larger population centers than the 25 districts used for Parliamentary elections and because there are only ten, candidates need more votes and a wider level of public support to be elected to the Municipal Council than to Parliament. (Comment: If total voter turnout is 73 percent -- equivalent to the turnout in the 2003 National Assembly elections -- and the election race in each district is very close, a municipal candidate would have to receive an average minimum of 2,200 votes to win a seat on the Municipal Council. The average number of votes garnered by a victorious candidate in the 2003 National Assembly elections was 1,800. Six MPs were elected to Parliament in 2003 on less than 1,000 votes each and only 16 out of the 50 current MPs received more than 2,000 votes. End Comment.)

4. (U) The campaigns, in their final week, are in full swing as banners and bumper stickers can be seen throughout Kuwait and roadside signs are plastered along almost every mile of

road -- some with the face of the same smiling candidate have been placed every 20 feet for miles. Ahmed Al-Shimmari, a candidate whose constituency comprises much of downtown Kuwait City, publicly announced that his campaign centers on the beautification of the capital city. A candidate running in the rural western municipal district that includes Jahra, Sulaibikhat, Doha, and Amghara, Askar Al-Enezi, complained that his district lacked adequate public health, shopping, and recreational facilities and vowed to combat pollution. Other popular campaign issues are fighting administrative corruption, solving traffic problems, and combating "inefficiency."

15. (U) Although they are not eligible to vote, several women weighed in publicly with their concerns and the issues they would like to see addressed by the new Municipal Council. Among those issues highlighted were reducing administrative violations and corruption, protecting the environment, reducing traffic congestion, and addressing the housing shortage.

Council Corruption Blamed For Lack Of Progress In Kuwait

16. (C) Because of its role in approving construction and development contracts, the Municipal Council is popularly believed to be corrupt. Three-time Municipal Council member and current candidate Khalifa Al-Khorafi, cousin of Parliament Speaker Jassem Al-Khorafi, told PolOff there is a great deal of corruption in the Municipal Council. He said there is no excuse for Kuwait not to be as modern and developed as Dubai because it has both the necessary legal framework and the money to develop. He said the corruption, which he characterized as playing a larger role in the Council's work "than most even hear about," is easy to see. When you see an area that appears poorly maintained, he explained, it is clear corruption exists there because the Municipality has the resources to change it.

17. (C) Al-Khorafi referred to "legal corruption" as one of the biggest problems. He described this as when the Council openly approves contracts or accepts bids for projects to favor individuals or their companies, at the expense of productivity and efficiency. He offered as an example an occasion where three companies were competing for a contract and the contract was awarded by the Council to all three. He said this is not only inefficient but also "bad for Kuwait." He further complained that when the questionable proposal reached the Council of Ministers for final approval, accompanied by a written objection from him, it was approved with the help of Minister of State for Cabinet and Parliamentary Affairs Mohammed Dhaifallah Sharar, who oversaw the Council and whom he characterized as very corrupt. (Note: Minister Sharar was grilled in the National Assembly in December 2004 on charges of corruption. Most of the relevant and damaging charges against him involved contracts and salaries with the Municipality (ref D). End Note.) Khalifa pointed out that Prime Minister Shaykh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah reportedly mentioned corruption in the Municipal Council saying "convoys of camels couldn't carry the mistakes and corrupt profits coming from the Municipal Council." Because of the necessary role of the Council of Ministers in approving all municipality projects, Khalifa commented, "it was PM Shaykh Sabah who loaded those camels." Al-Khorafi, who must garner more votes to be elected to the Council than to Parliament, said that although he would have a good chance of being elected to the National Assembly, he prefers to continue pursuing a seat on the Council because he believes he can wield more power there to help Kuwaitis than anywhere else in the Government.

An Overview of the Council

18. (U) Established in 1932, the Municipal Council is a governing body that addresses societal and commercial issues that are below the visibility of the National Assembly, but require more oversight and national supervision than the local Cooperative Societies provide. (Note: Kuwait's ubiquitous Cooperative Societies (co-ops), which are located in each neighborhood throughout Kuwait, are chains of businesses that offer community services and shopping options such as grocery stores, fast food restaurants, and sports stores. Co-ops are governed by an elected board and shareholders, who are typically neighborhood residents, and their input shapes what services and jobs are available in a given community. End Note.)

19. (U) The Municipality assists in both public and private sector activities. It manages issues in the public's interest to include public planning, surveying and zoning, environmental affairs, construction and development projects. It also handles matters of public safety, street construction, public landscaping, maintenance of historical buildings, issuance of commercial licenses and advertisements, and supervision of graveyards and burials.

All projects and contracts approved by the Municipal Council must also be approved by the Council of Ministers before becoming legally binding.

10. (U) The 16 members sit as an entire Council every other Monday. Although the Municipal Council meets to conduct official business in downtown Kuwait City, each of the six governorates has a municipality center and each town within the municipality has a local office. The 1999 Council, the last elected, concluded its service in 2003, after which a caretaker Municipal Affairs Committee was formed to serve until new elections, scheduled for June 2, were held. An Amiri decree issued April 11, 2005 appointed Justice Minister Ahmed Bager as Minister of State for Municipal Affairs replacing Sharar.

11. (SBU) A new law governing the activities of the Kuwait Municipalities was issued in March. The long wait for this bill's passage contributed to the two-year delay in new elections. The law is more restrictive of the Municipal Council's authority and provides more oversight of the Council and its chairman. The Municipal Council previously had the authority to pass commercial and construction proposals that had been rejected by the Council of Ministers with a 2/3 majority vote. One candidate and long-time employee of the Municipality lamented the loss of this authority, calling it the "beating heart" of the Council. The new law also reduced the authority of the Municipal Council chairman. The Council chairman, who in the past was dual-hatted as chairman and as the head of the Municipality, has lost this latter portfolio which oversees personnel and employment issues throughout the Municipality. Bager, as the Minister of State for Municipal Affairs, is now the designated head of the Municipality. Bager has also been given the authority to reject single Municipal Council proposals without holding up all other submissions; in the past all proposals had to be approved or rejected en masse by the Council of Ministers.

The 1999 Council

12. (U) The most recent municipal election took place in June 1999. There were 58 candidates for the ten available seats in the ten different constituencies. Tribal candidates won six of the seats and the press claimed that vote-buying took place and may have influenced some of the election outcomes. After the dissolution of the Council at the end of its term of service in 2003, new elections were postponed for two years by the Council of Ministers due to delays in efforts to secure women's political rights and passing the legislation reforming municipality activities.

13. (U) Beyond addressing issues of importance to the local districts, the 1999 Council approved the requirements for the Failaka Island development project, approved the Boubyan Island development project, developed the western agricultural area, approved the Shuwaikh Free-Trade Zone structure, and allocated a second headquarters for the Kuwait Stock Exchange.

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